DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 455 750 HE 034 224

AUTHOR	Grenzky, Janet; Maitland, Christine
TITLE	Focus on Distance Education.
INSTITUTION	National Education Association, Washington, DC. Higher Education Research Center.
PUB DATE	2001-03-00
NOTE	8p.; Theme issue.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.nea.org/he/heupdate/vol7no2.pdf.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Reports - Research (143)
JOURNAL CIT	NEA Higher Education Research Center Update; v7 n2 Mar 2001
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*College Faculty; Compensation (Remuneration); Computer Mediated Communication; *Distance Education; Focus Groups; Higher Education; Intellectual Property; Professional Development; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Surveys; Telecommunications

ABSTRACT

As a followup to a survey of distance education faculty, the National Education Association conducted two 3-hour focus groups with 12 higher education faculty members in June 2000. The purpose of the groups was to gain more understanding of the complexity of feelings and opinions expressed in a telephone survey conducted in March 2000. The telephone survey indicated that 72% of distance learning faculty had a positive opinion of distance learning, compared to 14% who had a negative opinion. In the focus groups, as in the survey, increasing a student's access to education was the most frequently mentioned positive thought about distance education. The second most frequently mentioned set of concepts concerned the convenience of students being able to learn and faculty able to teach on a schedule and from a location of their own choosing. Faculty members were concerned about a lack of human contact and of the lack of reliability of the technology for distance education. In the focus groups, faculty had specific comments about training that was useful, or not useful, to them. Focus group members usually wanted enrollment limits to distance education classes, and they wanted to be compensated as other faculty were compensated for traditional courses. Faculty also raised concerns about controlling how their intellectual property was used. Overall, the focus groups provided insights into the attitudes of faculty members about distance education. (SLD)

ED 455 750

VOLUME 7 • NUMBER 2 • MARCH 2001

Update

Focus on Distance Education

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

R Hendrickson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✔ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

HE034924

VOLUME 7 • NUMBER 2 • MARCH 2001

Update

Focus on Distance Education

INTRODUCTION

As a follow-up to its survey of distance education faculty, NEA conducted two three-hour focus groups with 12 higher education faculty members in each of two sessions on June 23, 2000, at the NEA headquarters in Washington, DC.

The purpose of the groups was to gain more understanding of the complexity of feelings and opinions expressed in the telephone survey conducted in March 2000. We gain this in-depth understanding by listening to a few people talk at length. The shortcoming of focus groups is that the opinions these few people express may not be representative of the opinions of the larger group. The results of the March survey are on www.nea.org/he.

In the telephone survey, 72% of distance learning faculty have a positive opinion of distance learning, compared to only 14% who have a negative opinion. However, because the purpose of focus groups is to understand the diversity of opinion, we included at least two faculty members with negative opinions and at least two faculty members who are neutral toward distance learning. We were especially interested in probing for a better understanding of members' problems and concerns.

OVERVIEW OF OPINIONS ABOUT DISTANCE LEARNING COURSES

We began each session by asking members to write down what positive and negative feelings about distance learning initially pop into their mind. We do this to uncover the dimensions faculty use to think about and evaluate distance learning. As we found in the survey, faculty comments related to students were foremost in their mind, followed at a distance by concerns related to their professional lives.

Reaching out to more students. The survey showed that being able to reach more students was the key factor in faculty support for distance learning. The focus groups confirm this finding. Increasing a student's access to education was by far the most frequently mentioned positive thought about distance learning.

Flexible, customized learning and teaching. The second most frequently mentioned set of concepts concerned the convenience of students being able to learn, and faculty being able to teach, on a schedule and from a location of their own choosing. It is largely this flexibility that facilitates greater access.

> *I like the greater flexibility for the faculty. You can structure your time. Assuming you're not having synchronous meetings, you can pretty well decide when you want to work.*

> *Needs-based and driven. . . more or less what I call on-demand education, which is how I can best describe it.*

Greater interaction. While the interaction afforded through Web-based distance learning courses is, on balance, a definite positive, many participants were concerned that the interaction lacked a human face.

> *On the positive side, the students always like the additional interaction, the loads of interaction*

HE034894

with faculty. For example, like they can send e-mail, they can do a lot of different ways to interact versus one which is typically classroom or setting appointments.

The quality of the chat, a lot of times is better than class discussions. And also you can capture that, sort of automatically, capture it so students can go back, and they don't have to keep notes. So those are two very positive things that students like.

So on the counter side of alienation, it also opens people up and allows them to do some things they wouldn't ordinarily do.

...but concerns about lack of human contact.

I think it works both ways. I wrote down loss of humanity...Lack of personal contact with the student is a problem

I think relationships in education are critical and I think you have to be a very dynamic teacher and if you're on a flat screen you have to be able to come out of that screen. I had the ability to meet my students on two separate occasions in three dimensions, and it was very important that we be able to do that.

More work. Distance learning requires more work on the part of faculty and students. Generally, neither the students nor the administration recognize this.

Yeah, they [students] think it's going to be easier because they can do it on their own time, they're doing it from home, but in fact sometimes the work is actually more demanding.

On the negative side, I want to go back to emphasize the work, especially in my particular area where it's changing rapidly, it's a tremendous work load to maintain a good Web site, you're forever changing it.

I think many administrations have the feeling that if this is going to save in terms of labor, but in fact most of the courses that I teach on-line take more time for me per student than they would if I was teaching in a class.

I'd like to see accessibility on the negative side as well. I think students, faculty, and administration have a misconception of what accessibility means. Accessibility to a student may mean 4:00 a.m. and they say my instructor is never available

The reliability of the technology is problematic. Faculty complained of limited equipment, unreliable and incompatible equipment, expensive equipment, or no equipment at all.

TRAINING AND MENTORING

Faculty had very specific comments about the kind of training that was — and was not — useful to them. Faculty think it is crucial that they get on-demand support through the day and into the evenings when they are working on their course. Several talked about a future community of colleagues who would be conversant and knowledgeable in Web technology and be easily accessible.

One participant described problems with the workshops and training at his institution.

The training, the teacher training, has not been effective. There have been drive-by workshops so somebody comes in for an hour or so and they teach them how to do PowerPoint, or they teach them this or do that, and it never gets incorporated into the daily work, into the practice of teaching.

The following faculty experience is instructive in how a university moved from offering training that was of limited value to training that was effective.

This university is growing by leaps and bounds, they're expecting like 10,000 more students in the next five years. The administration has been pushing distance learning for about five years. When it first started technologically-oriented people gave workshops. It was trying to give you everything at once and by the time you got back to your office you didn't have a clue what they were talking about or when you actually tried to implement something a month later — gone.

Now they're doing much better on the workshops. The faculty and I think the NEA were both helpful in getting them to break the courses

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

into parts. It's like a 2-hour workshop here, or a 2-hour workshop there...Introduction to Web CT, and then Student Management and then Quiz Management, and then Maintaining Course Content and things like that and if you want to, get into the Dream Weaver software, you know actually going in and creating your own stuff, if you want to take it that far. They are now paying us for attending these workshops. They've been pushing us to do it for a long time. And that has made a difference. Or, you give them the disk, they put it up for you, you don't have to deal with that stuff. All you have to do is hand them the disk.

Others had nothing but praise for the training and support available to them.

I found the training extremely helpful, showing me how to use the software, how to go on-line, how to access all the things I need to access.... Actually I spent 16 hours in training.

Fabulous workshops they put on at our college. They really promote it. They have people available to do anything you want to do, in the sense that if you just walk in and hand them a stack of disks, they'll put it on the net for you, all kinds of work. In fact I think, what they're hoping for the future, is that they only have about 5-6 people teaching distance learning courses, but they have 5-6 people in the lab waiting to help them. It's overkill.

Yeah, we're the same. We have two full-time really well-educated people and then we have about four students that are, you know, computer whizzes, so any time of the day you want it you just walk over there and they've got it.

Furthermore, we see consensus around the importance of having support from a ***mentor faculty member*** who has an understanding of the content of the distance learning members' courses. A purely technical person was not nearly sufficient, since the support faculty members need requires a blend of technical expertise and understanding of the content.

There has to be some mentoring. You've got to get into the practice of teaching. I'm thinking about teacher preparation, and you've got to be training teachers how to teach. It's a different style of teaching. Workshops are very superficial. They throw you a little bit—this is what we can do and isn't this fun? Then that person gets back to their office; they start clicking a few buttons, and they get stuck and then, I don't know, who can I go get? It needs to be ongoing. It needs to be a ***community of practice.*** *Those that have some skills can share those; you've got apprentices, you've got journeymen, you've got masters if you will. That network has to be connected, and those people have to be able to support one another in this new practice of teaching.*

You need to have somebody who has an understanding of the curriculum and has an understanding of what it means to teach, and then you also need those people who have the technical expertise as an underpinning for all of that.

I'm concerned about marginalizing faculty and about being dependant upon a non-faculty person for part of our curriculum, for delivery of our instruction. That's not where I want to go.

I wanted to suggest from my experience that one thing is working on the main campus at the University of XXX, the largest one. It is the interdisciplinary team that taught courses. They're wonderful for both the training and the educational aspects. I personally developed as a technical person and from my peers with history and education in other subjects, because we're teaching a course together. It's a faculty development thing from our peers. It's the peer learning that we learn about all the time as educators.

COMPENSATION AND PROPERTY RIGHTS

Compensation. For the most part, faculty wanted enrollment limits and then to be compensated for their course in the same way as other faculty were compensated for their traditional courses. One or two courses of course release time for developing their on-line course would be ideal, but they did not see how that was feasible when their colleagues who were teaching traditional courses did not get release time for developing those courses. Distance

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

learning faculty were very concerned about the friction and division that could emerge within the faculty group as a result of distance learning faculty members being given special treatment. They felt that a salary with the possibility of an extra few hundred dollars, payment for the extra hours that distance learning courses required, was not enough to incur the divisiveness that could follow.

Developing the course and teaching the course were not divided into two stages, as the following exchange illustrates.

> *I would like to see release time for the development. One course off is not enough. Probably two, but it depends on how technical it is. My area is computer science, the course is changing. Sometimes it will mutate 3 or 4 times during the length of the course. And I'm out there trying to change things before the semester is even over with. You take history or math or something else that changes, but do they change as frequently and as rapidly?*

Others had trouble distinguishing the time they gave to updating their distance learning course from the time it took to update their traditional course.

> *Where that dividing line is between what I do in the classroom today in the talking head type of environment, versus in the electronic, because I'm so used to changing the course right now, even in the classroom, I'm not sure that there is really that much difference.*

At the other extreme, some participants received no support of any kind from their institution. However, even these faculty members were cautious about asking for more resources because they were concerned about generating opposition among a traditional faculty that was lukewarm to the idea of distance learning.

These participants described compensation systems on their campus which they think work well.

> *We have a good system for compensation in our college right now. Every course that's designed has to go into the Wisconsin instructional design system which is a software system and you get x number of hours based on your salary to develop a course or to revise a course. Then to put it on-line, that's another curriculum project... And they have a set, like for a 2 credit course it might be 40 hours to put it in this instructional design system and then to put it into what's called a technology grant, putting it into an on-line course you have a similar formula. We get paid our hourly rate outside of what our normal rate of instruction is.*
>
> *We have a team approach among faculty members who are teaching distance learning courses. There is a pool of money and we decide how to distribute it among themselves.*

Some faculty were more concerned with their own efforts being appreciated and recognized in tenure decisions than they were with making more money.

> *Without putting a dollar value on it, I think if the union could ask them to change the mindset to recognize the value in what we do, the course development, the expertise, the technology and consider it with things like tenure, or promotion. All I want is someone to recognize the time, the energy, and the motivation.... If you can get tenure for publishing — which in my case is basic science bench research for which you need a $400,000 well-equipped basic science lab — how about equally recognizing the creativity, the time and the energy that someone puts into Web-based courses view that as a publication.*

Property rights. Faculty were clearly more concerned about controlling how their intellectual property was used than the amount of money they might get for that property. In particular, they were most concerned that someone would cut and paste their course into other formats and ultimately misrepresent the points they wanted to communicate. It was very important to faculty that the union fight to clarify property rights, so that faculty are clearly informed as to what they do and do not own.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Several were adamant about owning all the rights to their courses.

About property rights. I am not giving it to them, I made it clear to them. I am not going to just do this course, produce this entire course and have some young guy that we hired last year, teach it for the next ten years, the whole work that I've done. So I'm holding the damn rights to it, I have it on my own Website, they're not getting it on their Website. I'm keeping it in case I want to sell it or give it as a gift.

I want any material that I present on-line. If they provide me a server, that's no different than providing me a filing cabinet in my office, and any material that I create and put in my filing cabinet, if I leave, it's clearly mine. Any material that's placed in their virtual filing cabinet, ought to be mine in the same way. And there shouldn't be a distinction there. For them to think that it's all of a sudden theirs is ludicrous.... Management has a concept that they can just push a button, start a class, and remove the faculty. That's what I want the union to protect.

I designed every single inch, every Web page, every icon, I don't use a template. What does it mean for me to own the content? I got release time to do that, so does that mean that if I were to leave, I'd have to leave everything? I have quite a few pieces of writing of my own that are copyrighted that predate the course that are also on my Web page....

I was teaching a Web-based course in children's literature. I had 120 students and I had one person, a TA, helping me with it. I was approached to do a televised section of the course. It sounded fine to me until I found out that they were recording the versions of class, and they were keeping a tape in their banks for future use. They said that was their intellectual property and they could keep it for x number of years and they could do whatever they wanted to with it. I said I don't like that at all, and I wouldn't do the televised course because of that. We had people doing televised courses who are what I would call actors, who had no real content material in there and no one would want to use that information for later use.

Participants disagreed considerably about how royalties should work. Some expected to get 10% to 15% of the total proceeds, which is about the author's share from a book. Others expected 50% of the proceeds. One raised the issue of teaching another faculty member's class.

I didn't develop the distance learning course I am teaching. Other faculty on campus designed the course for which the school paid them $5000, one shot. Then they can either run it, be on-line or they can hire somebody like myself, an adjunct, to do it. Of course I was with them for many, many years so they knew what they were getting, but then I run it and maintain it. For example, if the textbook changes, then we call on the faculty member on campus to redo the video lectures, but until it changes, I may change quizzes, I may change examinations, I may change homework assignments within that initial course. The video and lectures are what are proprietary....

Compensation, property rights and negotiations. No one wanted individual faculty members to have to negotiate for compensation on their own. All wanted the collective action— and the power and protection it affords.

ENROLLMENT LIMITS AND QUALITY

In the poll and in the focus groups, compensation was not one of their primary concerns, and therefore they did not have opinions on some issues related to compensation.

However, the majority favored enrollment limits in order to maintain the quality of the course. They wanted a curriculum review committee, faculty senate or other faculty committee to set course limits that were specific for each course. Faculty could exceed that limit by one or two students, but no more.

I want our curriculum committees, that faculty driven body, to set those limits and not for it to be an administrative, managerial discretion. And who better can make that determination except for that group of faculty —whether it be part of the academic senate, or part of our department decision. They will know what the type of course

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

is, how it's designed, and how it will most be effectively delivered. And getting that out of managerial discretion and into faculty discretion is where I want my union behind me, pushing for that.

I think 15 is a real nice number because my fundamental concern is that administrators see this as a way of teaching 200 students with one faculty member. My distance education course started with 147 students and 22% of them finished with a C or better. I can change instantly my retention and that's where the push is. All I have to do is lower my standards. It doesn't cost me a penny, it makes it easy, so there's a conflict of interest here.... I've sat on a lot of budget committees, I know what they have to do, and so it's not that they're the bad guys, but there really are two very different sets of interests going on here.

My only concern is quality and that becomes a personal ethical decision. If I get paid per student my first thought is to get as many students as I can and make more money, but I can tell you that with 500 students a semester, maintaining this pace as I have for many years, I'm starting to get burnt out. But students that I have in this current semester and all my past students keep coming back, so I have lines out the door and I have Emails out the whazoo and they don't ever go away....

A few were concerned that allowing a few faculty to teach large courses on a per-student basis would eventually result in other faculty (or adjuncts) teaching the same large course for no extra money.

I think that's a real problematic situation because what you have is an administrator there. You're paying people to take extra students and say Laura cuts it off at 22, but they have someone who they can hire who will take 30, who lowers the standards. So there may be somebody that says, hey I can do 40 because I need the money. So the incentive is totally against quality and Laura doesn't get hired. That's a real problematic situation.

You know why that's important? Because pretty soon Laura is let go and they hire Laura-lee and that's Laura-lee's only job, you know part time adjunct, and she'll take 100, you know what I mean?

But what they'll do is leverage the pay. They'll say well we can hire an adjunct to take this course that you don't own, sue us if you think you do own it, and we'll see you in court. You won't sue them, they'll have the course, they'll have an adjunct come in to teach it, your $100,000 disappeared and they're now paying $10,000 to the person to do the exact same thing.

Office of Higher Education
1201 Sixteenth Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036
202-822-7100
E-mail: Highered@NEA.org

Higher Education Staff
Rachel Hendrickson — Deborah Mitchell
Dely Pena — Cathie Sheffield-Thompson

This issue prepared by: Janet Grenzky, President, Abacus Associates and Christine Maitland, NEA Staff.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE